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view their jobs – it is my day and, more often than not, my night job.

What do you do outside work?

To relax and to get away from music, I pursue my passion for flying – I am currently doing my glider's solo licence. I also walk everywhere, as it helps me think. Having been a Londoner all my life, I started getting fed up of seeing this great city from underground.

What's the best way to achieve a dream?

Listen to yourself more than others. I hesitate to advise a determination to pursue something at all costs, but you know when something feels right and makes you happy when you're doing it. Then it is hard work and meeting the right people. I don't just mean people who can give you opportunities, I also mean people who can support you when things go wrong.



'The performing buzz is addictive'

What moments have really moved you?

The most fun and rewarding show I have ever been involved in is Noye's Fludde by Benjamin Britten. I have conducted this show in Belfast Zoo, Beijing, Shanghai and at Nevill Holt. 150 children are required in each performance – 100 on stage and 50 in the orchestra. In Belfast, we were joined by 20 children from the National Children's Choir Of China. As a thank you after the last performance, they sang Danny Boy to everyone. It was so touching and had everyone in floods of tears.

What's the hardest part of the job?

Not everything goes to plan in live music-making and it can feel like your world has caved in if things go wrong. And it goes

wrong in front of lots of people. I have experienced the difficult moments of the freelance career – the financial insecurity, an empty diary, doubts in my ability to get the best from singers and orchestral players. Luckily, I find the buzz from live performance addictive and whenever I wonder whether I am crazy pursuing this profession, a concert comes along, goes well and I feel elated and just want to do it again and again.

Did anyone try to talk you out of your career?

The chemistry teacher who laughed in my face when I told him I wanted to apply to Oxford did me the biggest favour ever. It made me more determined, and I proved him wrong.

■ *A new opera house by Stirling Prize-winning architects Witherford Watson Mann opens at Nevill Holt this summer, where Mozart's 'Le Nozze di Figaro' and Thomas Adès' 'Powder Her Face' will be staged from June 14 to 30, nevilleholtopera.co.uk, 0115 846 7777*

PHOTO: JONATHAN COLE PHOTOGRAPHY



Baby boom: Helen Nott outside the Bristol nursery

'I wanted a job that meant I could be waiting at the school gates'

Oliver Stallwood talks to the mum whose business acumen is an inspiration

BACK in 2003, Helen Nott was made redundant from a well-paid job in legal recruitment. While considering what to do next, she did some voluntary work with a charity. Helen wanted a successful career and the pay that would come with it, but she also wanted to spend more time with her two young boys, Ben and Ollie. So what to do? She decided the best way to have both a career and be able to spend time with her family was to be her own boss.

And so in 2004, along with a business partner, she set up Charlton Nursery in Wraxall, near Bristol.

'Because I wasn't in paid work at the time I felt I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. I didn't set out to be an entrepreneur but when I was considering my next move, I'd learnt from my time out that I wanted to make my next position

work with my children and to be there for them at the school gates,' she says.

It was a brave move – not least because she had no experience in the childcare industry.

Like all good entrepreneurs, she didn't let this deter her – she just pulled in the expertise from elsewhere. She recruited qualified childcare practitioners while she concentrated on building the business.

At the beginning, Helen would be working 60-hour weeks but was able to meet the children from school, taking them back to the nursery while she finished and they did homework.

With demand for quality childcare

high, Charlton Nursery became a huge success. Two further nurseries were opened – in Flax Bourton in 2010 and in Bristol (pictured) in 2014. And although they moved out of their original Wraxall home in 2017 as they weren't able to modernise the rented site, Helen's staff has now grown from two to 70.

But in 2016, Helen split from her business partner and found herself running the nurseries alone. 'It was the hardest time I've faced – probably personally as well as professionally. And I drew on my support network and came through it. It was the right decision but it certainly was never part of the plan.'

What advice would Helen have

for other mothers juggling life and work? 'Everything needed to be organised to the nth degree,' she says. 'I did as much in the evenings as possible. I used to get everything ready for the next day – down to laying out school uniforms the night before. I'm lucky in that I had a supportive husband, but he also worked in London some days so I drew on the support around me – including my fantastic parents.'

'You cannot do it alone, you need a team around you. Friends, usually fellow parents, and I would help each other out wherever we could.'

Helen's sons are now 20 and 23, and extremely proud of their mum. 'Ben recently said to me that he wanted to work until he's 40 in his current job in London and then head back west and be a successful entrepreneur like both of his parents. That meant so much to me.'

■ charltonnursery.co.uk



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